India & Sri Lanka
Temples, wildlife and the beaches
ABOUT THE ITINERARY

14 Days

This is an innovative itinerary designed to discover some of the hotspots of biological and cultural diversity of two South Asian Countries: India and Sri Lanka. This itinerary will allow you to visit some of the most worshipped South Indian temples and the beauty of nature of Sri Lanka. During this trip you will have the opportunity to admire some of the most famous and renowned temples and architectures of Tamil Nadu and simultaneously being immersed into the cultural and spiritual heritage of its people. The tour will start from the ancient city of Mahabalipuram, a flourishing port town of the Pallava rulers of south India, famous for being a fabulous "open-air museum" of sculpture under the vault of a burning sky. From here you will visit an interesting project of Dakshinachitra a NGO engaged in the preservation of arts, tradition and architecture of South Asia. Later you discover the ex French colony of Pondicherry that with its remains of French connection make this place distinct from other places in India. On the way to Kumbakonam, you will visit Chidambaram, where is located the India only temple dedicated to Shiva Nataraja (dancing Shiva). Here we will visit an interesting development project of a local NGO supporting women and children in need. The Airavateswara temple of Kumbakonam and the Meenakshi temple in Madurai will be your next visits. From Madurai you will take a flight to Colombo at the discovery of Sri Lanka, one of the finest wildlife watching countries in South Asia. The island may be small in size, but the variety of habitats, and the wildlife found here, would do justice to a country many times its size. Your first destination in the country will be the hilly town of Kandy. Before reaching the hilly station you will have the chance to discover an interesting elephants conservation project in Pinnawala, famous for having the largest herd of captive elephants in the world, having the opportunity to observe the bathing elephants from the broad river bank as the herd interacts socially, bathing and playing in. Nearby Kandy you will be immersed in the lifestyle of a local village, discovering their agricultural practices. Next destination will be the beautiful, silent and strange world of the Horton Plains. Here you will discover the surprising diversity of wildlife trekking in the shadows of Sri Lanka’s second and third highest mountains. Arugam Bay welcomes you to a different Sri Lanka. It is located at the “end of the road” on the East Coast of Sri Lanka. If you’re after remote rural life with all the atmosphere of jungle and adventure this is the place for you. The bay is located 320 km due east of Colombo. “Ullai” as Arugam Bay is locally known is a popular surfing and tourist destination. Beyond surfing there are many things can be enjoyable, Lagoon tour, bird watching, elephant watching, Kumana National Park, Kudumbigala monastery and many ancient ruins and archaeological sites. There are lot of tourist not only surfers, but many nature lovers visiting Arugam Bay. Here you can watch wildlife, you may drive in a jeep 10-15 km down South before sunrise or walk along the lagoon. Being an area with links back to ancient kingdoms there are many remnants in the jungle from old Buddhist culture. Just outside Pottuvil behind the dunes are excavations of a 2000 year old temple, Modu Maha Vihare. In Arugam Bay you will have a lunch in Panama prepared by local community and visit Kudimbigala temple. The last two stops of the itinerary on the way back Colombo will be Tangalle, where you can visit a Turtle conservation project, and the lovely Mirissa beach, idel location where to have some rest before you return back home.
ACTIVITIES

- visit the beautiful and majestic temples of Tamil Nadu
- explore traditional architecture, crafts and culture of South India in Dakshinachitra
- visit the ex-French colony of Pondicherry
- boat trip in Pichavaram Mangroves forest
- discover an interesting development project of a local NGO in Chidambaram
- visit the majestic Gangaikonda Cholapuram temple
- experience a Bharatanatyam dance performance in Kumbakonam
- visit one of the most ancient Indian Temple in Thanjavur
- visit the famous Meenakshee temple of Madurai
- help bathing and feeding elephants in Pinnawala’s elephant orphanage
- enjoy a community based experience in Heeloya Village, exploring organic home-gardens and paddy fields
- visit the most famous Sri Lankan temple in Kandy
- assist at a cultural dance performance in Kandy
- trek inside the Horton Plains National Park
- experience surfing or relax on the beach of Arugam Bay
- explore the wildlife of Kumana (Yala East) National Park through an amazing Jeep Safari
- enjoy a traditional Sri Lankan lunch in a village house in Panama
- visit the ancient temple in Lahugala, the Magul Maha Viharaya
- explore Uraniya and Lahugala villages, where local farmers practice organic agriculture
- try to spot sea turtles laying eggs, while visiting a conservation project in Tangalle
- slip into a hammock or rock gently in the breeze in the beautiful Mirissa beach
All the itinerary has been designed in order to promote direct or indirect benefits for local communities, environment and cultural heritages. When possible we have selected traditional accommodations sensible to social and environmental issues, following general principles and practices of responsible tourism. In particular INDeco resorts of Mahabalipuram and Kumbakonam have been created with a specific intention to serve as a source of funding for social, cultural and economic development of rural areas where the hotels are located. One of the most important prerogatives is to ensure that those hotels emerged from the existing village framework, its culture, traditions, lifestyle, practices and above all the information, talent and knowledge. INDeco Swamimalai of Kumakonam is set in an ancient village amidst the culture, tradition and arts and it is India's only winner of Global Eco Tourism Award! Both the INDeco hotels selected during the itinerary aims at restoring historical properties as to preserve and value India's tradition and cultural heritages. While restoring heritages INDeco have been able to transform hospitality from mere shelter to unique experiences, where to showcase authentic India and promote equal employment opportunities to rural youth! Many are the activities and exposure visits during the tour that will allow you to access the culture and the social interventions in favour of marginalized communities. On the way to Mahabalipuram we will visit Dakshinachitra, an NGO working for the preservation of traditional arts and craft. Dakshinachitra (which literally means “a picture of the south”) is an exciting cross cultural living museum of art, architecture, lifestyles, crafts and performing arts of South India. Here you can explore 17 heritage houses, amble along recreated streetscapes, explore contextual exhibitions, interact with typical village artisans and witness folk performances set in an authentic ambience. Near Chidambaram you will discover the activities of another local NGO called EKTA, working in support of women’s rights and empowerment. The visit to Nambikai centre will give you the possibility to interact with girl studying there. Visiting a local village you will get to know traditional prawn catchers and their livelihoods. In Pichavaram the boats used for cruise belong to local communities, which will receive an additional income from our visit. In Sri Lanka you will have several chances to meet and interact with local communities as to get a real exposure to organic and agri-business initiatives. In Heeloya Village local community will welcome you showcasing their village, through organic homestead gardens and paddy fields. Local community guide will show you many local spices, vegetables and fruits as to explain the agricultural practices. In a village farmer’s house you will experience traditional rice & curry lunch prepared with organically grown vegetables. Also in the East Coast you will have other opportunities to discover local villages, where groups of women will host you for a traditional lunch village: in Panama, Uraniya and Lahugala villages, where local farmers practice organic agriculture, you will get a clear idea of the lifestyle of traditional farmers. Finally during this tour you discover interesting initiatives promoting wildlife conservation: 1) the elephant orphanage in Pinnarwela, 2) Pottuvil lagoon in Arugam Bay and 3) the Turtle conservation project in Rekawa. The Elephant orphanage in Pinnawala was originally set up to care for orphaned baby elephants and now it is a breeding ground with its own herd. The Pottuvil lagoon Eco-tour is a new initiative in management of mangroves ecosystem, which brings together local fishermen, government officials and tourists. During the 2 hours canoe tour through Pottuvil lagoon you will experience the serenity and beauty of this unique ecosystem. The Turtle conservation project in Rekawa provides protection for marine turtles. The project has developed a unique approach to turtle conservation, which provides in situ protection for nests, leaving the eggs where they are laid while “nest protectors” protect the entire beach from poaching and predators 24 hours a day. Moreover, your contribution of 70 euros will support development projects in favour of one of the most marginalised tribal Communities of India. Tribal communities are still at the margin of Indian society and for this reason two are the main projects financed: 1) to conserve biological and cultural diversity and 2) to promote the formal education of children belonging to Kattunaickan community of the Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu.
PROGRAM DETAILS

DAY 1: Chennai- Mahabalipuram
Early morning arrival in Chennai (Madras) airport. Transfer to Mahabalipuram in the hotel for some rest. Later visit Dakshinachitra, a centre for the living traditions of arts, crafts and architectures of South India. Two hours guided tour visiting all the heritage houses exploring their nooks and corners. Possibility of direct experience of arts and crafts. Return to Mahabalipuram. Overnight in Mahabalipuram (B).

DAY 2: Mahabalipuram
After breakfast full day for the discovery Mahabalipuram. Mamallapuram dates back to the Tamil Pallava dynasty in the 7th-9th century. The structures here, mostly carved straight out of granite, are among the oldest existing examples of Dravidian (South Indian) architecture. In the morning you will have a guided visit of sea Shore temple, five rathas and Thirukadalmallai temple. The Shore temple is the oldest structure in the area, build c. 700 AD. However, unlike Mamallapuram’s other monuments, the Shore Temple is a building (not carved from rock) and the bulk of the current structure is a reconstruction after it was struck by a cyclone. After lunch transfer to Pondicherry. Rest in the hotel and evening walk around the city. Overnight in Pondicherry. (B)

DAY 3: Pondicherry
With its seafront promenade, wide boulevards, enduring pockets of French culture and architecture, and a popular ashram, Puducherry, the original name of the city, is unlike anywhere else in South India. Remains of French connection make this place distinct from other places in India. The former French colony was settled in the early 18th century as a colonial enclave and it retains a mildly Gallic air superimposed on a typical Indian background. Pondicherry is enriched with its architectural marvel and cultural wealth. Today a guided tour will allow you to discover the main tourist attractions. You will visit Sri Aurobindo Ashram, where Sri Aurobindo and the Mother spent their time for the upliftment of society, the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Bharti and Bharthidasan Memorial museum. In its credit it has the birth-place of Subramanya Bharathy, the great Tamil poet and also the birth place of world famous film director M. Night Shyamalan. Later you will have free time to explore the city, beaches and promenade. You might walk along the seashore, which is always clean, charming and amazing with its beauty.
Overnight in Pondicherry. (B)

DAY 4: Pondicherry – Chidambaram – Kumbakonam
Departure to Chidambaram. Here we will visit an interesting development project of a local NGO called EKTA. The NGO promotes campaigns to end violence against women, facilitates networks for experiential sharing and collective action. It advocates and lobbies for gender sensitive policy changes to further the interest of women and address gender based violence in particular. In particular you will visit the Nambikkai Centre, which host 30 girls, providing them with maximum opportunity to explore their creative skills in different disciplines, sports, dance, music, etc. This Centre also acts as a drop-in centre for women and children in need. Lunch will be prepared by women of a local village. After lunch visit of Pichavaram mangroves forest, which is spread across of around 2800 acres on the back water with a group of small islands. On a traditional boat you will paddle across the narrow mangrove bushes where the motor
boat cannot reach. Since Mangrove trees are dense and
found in water bodies there are many birds found in this
place, both native and migratory birds are commonly
seen. Late afternoon you will visit Chidambaram temple
for the aarti puja. After transfer to Kumbakonam, famou-
sly called the 'temple town' or 'The City of Temples' given
the number of temples that have been built in and around
the town. Check in the hotel.
Overnight in Kumbakonam. (B/L)

DAY 5: Kumbakonam
After breakfast visit Gangaikonda Cholapuram temple.
The Temple is an outstanding monument of the Chola
period. The name literally means 'The town of the Cholas
who defeated the Gangas'. Gangaikondacholapuram
temple is part of the UNESCO World Heritage site and a
living sample of the Great Living Chola Temples. After
visit and Dharasuram village. The village, located 3 km
from Kumbakonam, is known for the Airavateswara
temple constructed by the Rajaraja Chola II in the 12th
century A and is an exquisite symbol of the supremacy
of Chola architectural style D. The temple is a recognised
UNESCO World Heritage monument. Airavat is the holy
White Elephant and the temple is dedicated to the Lord of
Airavat. On the way Evening performance of Bharathana-
tyam with traditional vegetarian dinner.
Overnight in Kumbakonam. (B/D)

DAY 6: Kumbakonam – Thanjavur – Madurai
Early morning departure to Madurai. On the way visit to
Brihadishvara Temple in Thanjavur. Thanjavur, otherwise
known as Tanjore, is a city of Chola rulers and it gained
popularity during the Chola period between 11th and
14th centuries. According to a local legend, Thanjavur
derives its name from Tanjan, an asura ruler, who was
killed by Lord Vishnu and Sri Anandavalli Amman for
devastating the neighbourhood and was granted his last
request that the city be named after him. The Great Chola
emperor Raja Raja Chola built this famous Brahadeshwa-
ra temple or the Big Temple. This temple showcases the
Indian architectural brilliance and is a favourite pilgri-
mage spot for many visitors visiting Tanjore. After lunch
transfer to Madurai.
Overnight in Madurai. (B)

DAY 7: Madurai – Colombo – Kandy
Fly from Madurai airport to Colombo. Transfer to Kandy
and on the way visit Elephant orphanage in Pinnawala.
Set up to care for orphaned baby elephants, the orpha-
nage is now a breeding ground with its own herd. Home
to over 80 elephants, this is the place to see little ones
being bottle-fed and grown-ups walking side-by-side
and playing in the river. You can help bathe the elephants
and feed these wonderful animals. After the visit check in
at Hotel.
Overnight in Kandy (B).

DAY 8: Kandy – Heeloya – Kandy
After breakfast proceed to Heeloya Village. Welcome by
the village community. Enjoy the local refreshments and
herbal tea. Trek in the village through organic village
home gardens and paddy fields. Local community guide
will show you many local spices, vegetables and fruits in
the home gardens of the village farmers. The destination
is the village water fall. Enjoy the views and the serenity
of the waterfall. Trek down to a village farmer's house to
experience traditional rice & curry lunch prepared with
organically grown vegetables. Proceed back to Kandy.
Visit Kandy Temple of Tooth Relic and Cultural Dance
performance in the evening.
Overnight in Kandy (B/L).

DAY 9: Kandy – Nuwara Eliya
Early morning start to Nuwara Eliya. Today you will have
a trekking in the Horton Plains National Park. Perched on
the very edge of the hill country midway between Nuwara
Eliya and Hapatule, Horton Plains National Park covers a
wild stretch of bleak, high-altitude grassland bounded at
its southern edge by the dramatically plunging cliffs that
mark the edge of the hill country, including the famous
World’s End, where the escarpment falls sheer for the best part of a kilometre to the lowlands below. Overnight in Nuwara Eliya (B/L).

DAY 10: Nuwara Eliya – Arugam Bay
After breakfast proceed to Arugam Bay. Arugam Bay, a moon-shaped curl of soft sand, is home to a famed point break that many regard as the best surf spot in the country. You can experience surfing or if you’re not a surfer, you can relax, sunbath or walk on the beach. Overnight in Arugam Bay (B).

DAY 11: Arugam Bay
Leave for Kumana (Yala East) National park Jeep Safari in early morning with packed breakfast. After the jeep safari, on the way to Panama village, visit Okanda Hindu Temple and Kudumbigala Buddhist Monastery. Have lunch at a village home in Panama. Then proceed back to Arugam Bay. Evening at leisure. Overnight in Arugam Bay (B/L).

DAY 12: Arugam Bay - Tangalle
Proceed to Pottuvil lagoon canoe trip early in the morning. Return back to the hotel for breakfast. Then proceed to Uraniya and Lahugala villages, where local farmers practice organic agriculture. Enjoy lunch with the local community in Uraniya thereafter visit Magul Maha Viharaya, an ancient temple in Lahugala. Then proceed to Tangalle. After dinner proceed to Turtle Conservation project. You may have the opportunity to witness something extremely rare, which is marine turtle’s coming to the shore to lay eggs. After the visit proceed back to hotel. Overnight in Tangalle (B/L).

DAY 13: Tangalle – Mirissa
After breakfast proceed to Mirissa. Enjoy a day free to relax on the beach, crack open a coconut, slip into a hammock or rock gently in the breeze, allowing your remaining hours in Sri Lanka to slip calmly by. Overnight in Mirissa (B).

DAY 14: Mirissa – Colombo airport
Proceed to Colombo Airport for your international flight.
TIPS BEFORE DEPARTURE

A conscious approach to travel requires a considerable capacity and willingness to adapt and adjust to the local environment and culture. If you wish to travel with us we request you to be open enough to experience local culture, religious and traditions without bias and pre-conceived ideas you might have before the departure and which belong to our Western cultural way of thinking. Exploring with fresh eyes, with patience and openness, you will be able to access the real essence of South Asian cultural heritages, through the places and people you are going to meet; if you are ready to do this effort you will really enjoy the beauty of a completely different cultural tradition, the extraordinary of the nature, the solemnity of Dravidian and Buddhist temples, the holiness of the waters of countless rivers and oceans that flow through this magic land...

While travelling in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, despite being famous tourist destinations, it is advised that you following carefully a code conduct which respects local culture to avoid any hassles or unwanted troubles along your journey. In particular, avoid to show affection in public places, such as hugging, kissing etc., as this behaviour is not appreciated by local people. Smoking also is considered an offence (in certain cases also punishable under law). You are advised to follow a certain dress code. There are basically two reasons why it is recommended to be careful about what clothes you wear while traveling to the area. The first reason is to prevent you from hurting the sentiments of the local people and second, to protect you from the varied weather conditions prevailing in seasons. One more thing to keep in mind is mosquitoes...it is advised to keep your arms and legs covered because it provides protection (however, don’t forget to bring with you mosquito nets and repellents, especially for backwaters cruises). India and Sri Lanka's time zone is GMT/UTC +5.30, so chances of jet lag cannot be ignored. It is advised that you get onto this time zone as soon as you leave home and try to eat and sleep according local time. Also, if you reach India early in the day, try to stay awake – this will help the body's internal clock to reset.